

Report from the Interagency Committee Regarding Three Public Forums Concerning Transportation Services for People with Disabilities

At the May 23, 2005, meeting of the Board of Supervisors, the Fairfax County Department of Transportation (FCDOT) was directed to chair an interagency workgroup to plan and implement a process to identify transportation barriers faced by people with disabilities. (See Attachment I.) This directive was in response to issues raised by residents with disabilities reporting inadequate access to and reliability of transportation options.

The following report documents the results from the three public forums that were held to solicit input from seniors and people with disabilities about their experiences. This report includes the following: a description of the process employed to address the May 23, 2005, Board Matter; a summary of the public comments, complaints, compliments and recommendations; a summary of general, multimodal comments and recommendations; and finally, a staff recommendation for short-term (Phase I) and long-term (Phase II) actions.

The Process

The FCDOT, with assistance from the county's Disability Services Planning and Development Program (Department of Family Services), Area Agency on Aging, Community Services Board, Department of Cable Communication and Consumer Protection, Systems Management for Human Services, Consumer Protection and FASTRAN, conducted three community forums. The public forums were held on November 1, 2005, from 7 to 9 pm, at the South County Government Center; November 3, 2005, from noon to 2 pm, in the Reston Human Services Conference Room; and on Saturday, November 5, 2005 at the Virginia Tech/UVA Northern Virginia campus in Falls Church. These sites were selected because of their proximity to public transportation, and because they were geographically dispersed. Day, evening and weekend sessions were scheduled to allow for maximum participation. Each forum had a transcriber and alternative accommodations were available upon request.

The forums were advertised through a public notice on FAIRFAX CONNECTOR and FASTRAN buses, in Fairfax County libraries, through e-mails, in NewsLink, and on several list serves including those of the Association of Retarded Citizens (ARC) of Northern VA, the Endependence Center, and the Disabilities Services Board. Additionally, notification was provided through e-mails, posters at senior centers and Therapeutic Recreation locations, and notification letters were mailed to Fairfax County residents who are registered users of MetroAccess. The Disability Services Board had previously found that half of people with disabilities are seniors; therefore the forums also were advertised in the Area Agency on Aging's "Golden Gazette," which is a monthly newsletter.

The Community Response

Speakers included customers of public transit, individuals representing County appointed boards and commissions, government staff, care providers, and family members of riders. More than 85 people attended the forums, not including staff. Fifty-one citizens submitted written comments.

Many specific complaints (320) were received (a citizen could comment on more than one issue) as well as recommendations (129) and a number of compliments (17). Speakers talked about using transportation for trips to medical appointments, work, community programs, education, and for social activities. Most stressed the importance of timely, reliable and accessible transportation. (A complete list of all public comments is a part of this report and can be found in Attachments II – Complaints, and Attachment III – Recommendations and Compliments.)

Barriers and Suggestions Reported

MetroAccess is curb-to-curb paratransit service operated by the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) for citizens who due to disability are unable to complete their desired trip using regular fixed route service. Riders must schedule a trip at least 24 hours in advance, and riders are given an arrival time within a 30 minute window. All riders must be certified to use the service based on medical information presented to WMATA, in general, every three years. Fairfax County contributes funding to this service.

MetroAccess received the greatest number of complaints (140) and three compliments. (Note: The concerns reflected experiences with the previous MetroAccess contractor, LogistiCare. The current contractor, MV Transportation, took control of MetroAccess two months after these public forums.) Lack of reliability was mentioned the most (46 times), including specific complaints about late arrivals and no-shows. Complaints about operator and staff behavior (36 complaints), included comments about rude dispatchers and drivers; drivers who do not know the area; dispatchers who gave wrong information; drivers who are not fluent in English; the lack of the promised Automated Vehicle Locator (AVL) capability that would inform the dispatcher of the location and estimated time of arrival of a late-arriving vehicle; and drivers not giving verbal guidance to blind/vision impaired riders about how to get to and from the vehicle. Scheduling difficulties (16) ranked third, and safety/maintenance issues (11) ranked fourth among the concerns raised. Problems with the eligibility process and convenience (6) were reported, as was vehicle design (4). Several citizens mentioned difficulty in identifying the vehicle assigned for their trip when it arrived to pick them up; this situation is created because several subcontractors provide MetroAccess trips and often the rider is not notified which company received the pick-up order. There was a general sentiment expressed at the forums that MetroAccess lacks monitoring and does not respond to complaints.

A number of recommendations (17) were made to improve MetroAccess. The most frequent recommendation (5) was to implement same-day service. (Currently, service requests are required to be made 24 hours in advance of the trip.) In addition, speakers recommended the following:

- Implement a robust service monitoring process focused on the quality of service.
- Implement a more direct complaint process so that MetroAccess receives and resolves the complaint. (The new contract calls for all complaints to be tracked by WMATA, rather than the contractor.)
- Improve staff courtesy toward riders. Some speakers requested the following: MetroAccess staff be required to call clients when vehicles were running late; equipping vehicles with current maps; implementing a better process of communicating directions to operators; having an administrator “who cares;” and making customer service #1.
- Other recommendations included replicating Arlington County’s STAR program; expanding service into Prince William County; providing an adequate communications system for riders who are deaf or blind; and expanding assisted transportation for seniors.

FAIRFAX CONNECTOR is a fixed route bus service funded by Fairfax County and operated out of Fairfax County Department of Transportation.

The FAIRFAX CONNECTOR received a number of complaints (55). The greatest number (13) concerned operator behavior - drivers who are rude, not stopping at a requested stop, and not calling out stops. Issues about bus stops and shelters received the second highest number of complaints (12). Specifically, comments were made about stops not being located near intersections or crosswalks; the lack of shelters; stops that are poorly maintained; stops that lack accessible pathways; poor access from the stops to local businesses; and stops that are poorly lighted and without benches. Citizens also cited problems with bus schedules and lack of service (14), including buses arriving late or not at all, lack of mid-day and/or weekend service in some areas, and lack of service to some areas of the County. Wheelchair users cited broken lifts on some buses.

A number of recommendations (19) were made to improve FAIRFAX CONNECTOR:

- Improve the routes: requests for additional transit service; implement flex-routing; provide feeder bus connections from subdivisions; increase holiday and Sunday service; and coordinate services with Loudoun transit.

- Improve shelters: place shelters closer to stop lights and cross walk intersections; and enhance bus stops with lighting and benches.
- Improve rider information: display route numbers on bus stop signs which highlights the bus routes that serve the stop; provide on-board automated voice annunciators and visual displays for stops, so that riders know what stop is coming next; and make more public announcements about weather related rerouting.
- Improve customer service: provide drivers with current maps and a way to get directions; and train drivers to assist people who are visually impaired and be more sensitive to the needs of these riders.
- Monitor bus operations for ADA compliance.
- Increase ridership: provide a free-ride day to encourage new riders.

Metrobus is the fixed route bus system serving the Metropolitan Washington area. Fairfax County contributes funding to this service.

Metrobus received a number of complaints (30). Scheduling problems (12), including limited and/or lack of service to specific areas as well as difficult to read route maps and timetables were frequently noted. Operator and staff behavior complaints (6) including drivers who reportedly: are hostile and don't know how to use wheelchair lifts; take buses on the road with broken lifts; won't properly curb or kneel the bus; don't call out stops; and who do not know how to deal with persons with a speech impairment. Rude behavior from central office personnel was also noted. Bus stop and shelter complaints (5), including lack of benches, shelters without platforms, the need for snow removal from shelters, and the placement of shelters and stops were listed. Other complaints included difficulty in obtaining IDs for seniors and people with disabilities, high fares, crowded buses, and a system that is too complex to navigate for many consumers.

A number of recommendations (13) were made to improve Metrobus:

- Several were route-specific requests for additional or alternate service.
- Improve the eligibility process: people with permanent disabilities requested a permanent reduced fare ID rather than one that must be renewed, in general, every three years; in addition, a request was made to issue these ID's at a location in Fairfax County to avoid a trip to Washington, DC.
- Improve rider information: install tactile signage on fare-boxes for people who are blind.
- Increase ridership: a request was made to implement a free-ride day.

FASTRAN, operated out of the Department of Community and Recreation Services, is the county's human services transportation system. In addition to transporting people to County funded programs, it provides a mid-day, Dial-a-Ride program for low-income residents to medical and social service appointments, as well as shopping trips. Fairfax County funds this service.

FASTRAN received a number of complaints (25). The greatest number were about unserved and underserved areas, policies, and limited capacity (8). Attendees noted that FASTRAN can't be used for general work trips, has strict service zones which affect job placement options, and policies that do not allow it to be used for transportation to some appointments. Complaints also included: the slow and stringent eligibility requirements of the application process; problems with scheduling trips in advance; late pick-ups; lack of response to complaints; lack of sensitivity of operators, and rudeness of reservationists.

FASTRAN received several suggestions (7):

- Improved scheduling: more same day service; improve scheduling of proper bus for wheelchair users.
- Increase consumer input in planning: involve parents and consumers in decision making and planning; and to work more closely with specific programs.
- Improve financial support: raise fees and provide scholarships.

Metrorail, the metropolitan region's rail service, received a number of complaints (22), with accessibility issues being the most reported (10), including the gap between a train and a platform (threshold), low lighting on platforms and by turnstile and fare machines, stations without captioning, obstacles for the blind, and announcements which are difficult to understand. Comments were received about the new Metro plan to remove seating and the concern was expressed that it will be difficult on those customers who can't stand. Some participants commented on the fact that elevators and escalators don't always work, and that elevators are often dark and located in out-of-the-way places. Customer service comments included a lack of responsiveness to complaints, lack of information from station managers, and a lack of bathroom facilities. Comments were received about the placement of parking for people with disabilities at the Vienna Metro station, and about the insufficient number of spaces at Van Dorn Metro. Finally, there were comments about fares being too high.

Participant recommendations included:

- Improve maintenance and safety: improving the maintenance of elevators and escalators; improve lighting in elevators.

- Improve customer information: provide more tactile signage; clearly announce stops.
- Increase monitoring: use an outside group to monitor WMATA compliance with ADA laws.

Non-Emergency Medicaid Transportation provides Medicaid funded transportation to Medicaid-certified residents to medical appointments and approved day support programs. Rides must be scheduled one business day in advance. LogistiCare provides this service, under contract to the Virginia Department of Medical Assistance Services.

Medicaid Transportation received a number of complaints (19). Reliability (6) was reported as a problem, including late pick-ups and being stranded at an appointment when the driver does not show up for the return trip. Operator and staff behavior was mentioned (2), including drivers who are not sensitive to rider limitations due to cognitive disabilities, drivers arriving early for a scheduled appointment and demanding that the rider be ready, and dropping riders off without ensuring their safety. Regular riders and caregivers complained that drivers and companies change frequently and without notice; that there is difficulty communicating with drivers; and that there is a lack of vehicle attendants for riders who need extra supervision.

Following are the recommendations (4) related to this service:

- Improve customer service: provide sensitivity training for front-line staff.
- Improve accountability: implement a common check-sheet form for drivers to note injuries to clients; create program accountability for poor service.
- Improve scheduling: ensure that driving staff do not attempt to pick up riders on Community Services Board (CSB) contractor in-service training days.

Pedestrian issues in Fairfax County are addressed by the Department of Transportation Pedestrian Program Manager. (Pedestrian issues are also addressed in a recent report by the Pedestrian Task Force.)

Pedestrian issues were the topic of a number of complaints (15). They included, but were not limited to the following: the lack of sidewalks; no warning that the sidewalk ends; sidewalks and curb cuts not built to code; sidewalks that don't connect to each other; shrubs blocking sidewalks; lack of safe pedestrian access to stores, and generally poor maintenance. There was a consensus opinion that many roadways in the county are too dangerous for pedestrians to cross.

Taxicab service in Fairfax County is monitored by the Department of Cable Communication and Consumer Protection (DCCCP). The County's DOT also operates a discount taxicab-voucher program called Seniors-on-the-Go! (SOTG).

Taxicab service received complaints including drivers acting hostile toward clients with guide dogs, difficulties in scheduling the lift-equipped vehicles, and slow response times.

Recommendations included establishing an SOTG type program for persons with disabilities and increasing the number of lift-equipped taxicabs.

Multi-modal, Multi-jurisdictional Transportation Recommendations

While many complaints/comments were mode-specific, many residents expressed concerns that applied universally, across all modes, regardless of jurisdiction or disability. Following is a compilation of those comments, separated into four categories: Regional Coordination; Sensitivity Awareness; Service Monitoring, and Miscellaneous.

Regional Coordination (14)

Fourteen citizens commented on the need for more regionally based programs. Specifically, participants commented about the difficulty of getting information about a specific service that addresses their transportation needs. While there are many transportation options, there is not a location where information about all the available services can be found. The following were specifically recommended:

- One-Stop-Shop - Implement a One-Stop Shop for consumer information. This shop would provide transportation information for all regional transportation options, regardless of jurisdictional boundaries. This would include an on-line database for comments/complaints for all public transportation services. In a robust application, this One-Stop-Shop could: allow for centralized dispatch services for all providers to encourage shared-ride opportunities; and facilitate volunteer transportation services, and broker taxicab rides for non-English speaking residents by using language line.
- Coordinated/Comprehensive Transportation Planning - Coordinate transportation planning and expanding the scope of transportation planning to include the coordination of all travel access linkages from your trip origin to your destination. This comprehensive approach includes the following, with the goal of providing a seamless transportation linkage – sidewalks and trails, curb cuts, cross walks, pathways from curb stop, bus stops shelters, signage, routes, route deviations, alternative transportation, and all public transportation modes.

- Community Involvement - Revise the county's transportation plan to include issues raised in these public forums, and having quarterly focus group sessions made up of users, drivers, providers and programs to improve real-world transportation coordination; use complaint information to guide improvements

Sensitivity Awareness (4)

- Adopt the national Easter Seals-Project Action training programs and materials for all operators.
- Implement operator standards of conduct and training.
- Improve route and customer service training for dispatchers.
- Enforce the requirement that drivers do pre-trip testing of lifts.

Service Monitoring (3)

- Transportation Planners should ride the systems.
- Designate one county employee to receive, document and address complaints.
- Use technology to track location of buses, vans, cabs to ensure on-time pick-up.

Miscellaneous Recommendations (12)

- Include sliding fares for transportation based on income.
- Develop more accessible/walkable communities.
- Standardize and install accessible traffic signals.
- Install benches and lighting at bus stops.
- Locate affordable housing near bus stops.
- Consider the needs of seniors when planning transportation services.
- Create a public relations campaign to educate the public, including those who ride public transportation, about the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and courtesy to people with disabilities.
- Provide a dedicated funding source for all transportation services.

Phase I (short-term implementation) Plan Recommendations

This report from the Interagency Committee identifies some current, transportation barriers facing people with disabilities and seniors in our community. In response to these public comments, the committee recommends the following short-term actions be implemented:

- Identify seniors and people with disabilities to participate in on-going sensitivity training classes for FAIRFAX CONNECTOR and FASTRAN operators and staff. The implementing agencies responsible for this action are the FCDOT and the Fairfax County DCRS.

- Pilot a “mystery rider” program to monitor FAIRFAX CONNECTOR, FASTRAN, SOTG, MetroAccess, Metrobus, Metrorail, and taxicab street operations, with particular attention to the needs of seniors and people with disabilities.
- Formally communicate with all service providers that offer transportation services to seniors and people with disabilities that receive funding from Fairfax County a copy of the public forum comments. In addition, this correspondence shall emphasize the need for ongoing sensitivity training for all operators and staff involved with providing services to seniors and people with disabilities. Require sensitivity training where the County has control.
- Research the potential use of “smart card” technology for the SOTG program.
- Implement a subsidized taxicab rideship program for people with disabilities similar to the existing SOTG subsidy program. This program would complement MetroAccess service for Fairfax County registered users and provide an additional mobility option. Specifically, only registered Fairfax County users of MetroAccess would be eligible for this recommended program, and all current, non-age related restrictions that apply to the senior taxi subsidy program (subsidy amount, number of books that can be purchased per year, etc.) would also apply to this program. Currently, many jurisdictions (Alexandria City, Arlington County, Fairfax City, Falls Church City, Anne Arundel County, Baltimore County, Montgomery County, Prince George’s County, and the District of Columbia) in the Washington Metropolitan region have a taxicab program in place that offers a ridership subsidy for those with disabilities. This proposed program would provide discounted taxicab vouchers to Fairfax County residents, who are also registered MetroAccess users. This program would provide an alternative mobility option for qualified disabled other than MetroAccess. (As an example, this program would assist users in scheduling trips to see a doctor. Currently, a doctor visit is scheduled for a specific pick-up and drop-off time, and for the return trip after the appointment is completed. And while it is relatively easy to accurately schedule the drop-off time for the start of a medical appointment, often the return trip time is more difficult to pre-schedule due to the inevitable delays associated with a medical appointment. If, in this example, a MetroAccess client had the option of scheduling a subsidized taxicab – which does not require 24 hour advance notice - for the return trip, it would save the County money and make the process more convenient for the consumer.) It is estimated that this program would cost approximately \$260,000 annually. This number reflects the addition of an Administrative Assistant II position, and the subsidy amount was calculated based on comparing total, current SOTG users compared to the number of Fairfax County registered MetroAccess registrants, and assuming the same level of usage.
- Explore the development of a pilot Fairfax County based one-stop-shop for information about all transportation services. (This program would serve as a model for the implementation of a more robust, regional one-stop-shop for

transportation services and information program described in Phase II.) Currently, customers are frustrated and challenged by navigating the myriad of available transportation options (Metrorail, Metrobus, MetroAccess, FAIRFAX CONNECTOR, FASTRAN, Taxi Cabs, Seniors-on-the-Go!, Senior Express, and Medicaid transportation), all with varying eligibility requirements, and differing charge structures, and finally, uncertainty over the question of linkages between services. A One-Stop-Shop for all information about Fairfax County funded transportation programs would be a significant improvement over the current multi-furcated approach where each service provider has a separate number and information dissemination process. As envisioned by the Interagency committee, this program would assist callers identify their options, the cost of the trip, the eligibility restrictions, and then would assist in arranging/scheduling/accessing the trip. Important Phase I activities involve developing an inventory of all information resources that currently exist in Fairfax County transportation programs, exploring the consolidation issues associated with this proposal, and proposing an implementation plan, including a timeline and agency responsibilities.

All of the proposed Phase I Recommendations, with the exception of the One-Stop-Shop and the taxi subsidy program for the disabled, are relatively easily addressed using existing staff resources. The One-Stop-Shop is more complicated and requires additional funding, as does the implementation of the taxi subsidy program. The Interagency group recommends the establishment of a committee representing all County agencies involved in providing or supporting public transportation services to oversee and direct the work of a consultant in the research, analysis and implementation of unified, One-Stop-Shop information center for all Fairfax County funded transportation services. In addition, the group estimates the cost for the consultant to coordinate the One-Stop-Shop to be approximately \$100,000. The cost for the implementation of a taxi-subsidy program is estimated to cost, on an annual basis, approximately \$260,000. Total cost for all Phase I items is estimated at \$360,000.

Phase II (long-range implementation) Plan Recommendation –

The Department of Transportation and the Interagency Committee recommend the development of a comprehensive, ten-year action plan that prioritizes and defines the multi-modal, multi-jurisdictional transportation recommendations outlined above. The plan will consider and prioritize, with public input; the recommendations listed above, in the Multi-Modal, Multi-Jurisdictional Transportation Recommendations section, and develop draft policies which address the intent of the comments. For example, an action the Interagency Committee unanimously supports is the establishment of a regional, One-Stop-Shop for customer information about all travel options available to Fairfax County disabled and senior citizens. Currently this information is provided independently by the sponsoring jurisdiction, agency, and/or mode. The implementation of this idea requires the cooperation of many agencies and jurisdictions and will be a time-intensive, complicated effort. The implementation of this One-Stop-Shop effort is a more expanded, robust effort than the Fairfax County focused effort described in Phase I above.

The Phase II Plan will, once completed, be presented to the Board of Supervisors.

The complexity of this next step requires the assistance of a professional consultant and it is estimated that this activity will cost approximately \$250,000.

Validation with Current Reports

Two regional transportation related reports reinforce the findings from the Fairfax County forums, as does the recently completed Fairfax County Pedestrian Task Force Final Report.

The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments’ “Improving Demand Responsive Services in the Washington Region” is focused on increasing mobility for people with disabilities who are unable to use fixed-route transit. Draft recommendations include allowing user input in development of the eligibility process; offering travel-training appropriate to each type of disability; having a central point for consumer information; greater availability of rider information including alternative formats; greater customer input; revamping MetroAccess no-show policies; increased monitoring; improving the responsiveness of the complaint process; providing door-to-door MetroAccess service as appropriate; creating same day MetroAccess service; improving pedestrian access to fixed route service; coordinating the planning and provision of specialized transportation services; increasing the availability of transportation options such as increased numbers of wheelchair-accessible cabs; and conducting an independent review of the new MetroAccess service in one year.

The Northern Virginia Transportation Commission’s “Meeting the Transportation Needs of Northern Virginia’s seniors” is a comprehensive study that focused on the needs of seniors aged 75+ in the region. The report identifies the characteristics affecting the future travel patterns and mobility needs of older adults and makes short and long-term recommendations. Recommendations included: centralized information and referral for public transportation; increased travel training; seamless coordination of transportation services; targeted marketing and incentives for seniors; senior sensitivity training for transportation drivers; low floor buses; local community routes - designed for seniors - using smaller vehicles; increase support for volunteer transportation services; implement swipe-card technology in cabs; integrate transportation planning into overall community planning as well as planning for affordable/accessible housing; negotiate senior-friendly proffers; and build pedestrian friendly streets. Phase II of this initiative is focusing on travel training and driver sensitivity activities.

The Fairfax County Pedestrian Task Force Final Report notes among existing conditions: “In most of Fairfax County there is some infrastructure to support pedestrian activities, with significant portions built as part of road projects and development. However, there are many gaps in the trails and sidewalks network. In some areas the trail and sidewalk network does not exist and maintenance and sustainability of existing

facilities are not constant, making it almost impossible for pedestrians and bicyclists to safely travel to nearby destinations. Nor are there adequate and accessible connections to bus and rail stops for people to walk to public transportation facilities. "In many places in Fairfax County, pedestrian travel is difficult due to 1) incomplete or missing sidewalk and trail infrastructure along major highways, 2) the need to cross high speed/high traffic roadways with inadequate safe crossings, 3) walkways connected to bus stops that are not accessible to residents with disabilities, and 4) discourteous drivers and violation of traffic safety laws, especially failure to yield right of way to pedestrians at intersections and crosswalks." The report made recommendations, cost estimates and funding priorities.

Financial Impact

In order to address the recommendations in Phase I, an allocation of \$360,000 is required. Of this amount approximately \$260,000 is an annual funding requirement and \$100,000 is a one-time expense.

In order to undertake Phase II recommendations, \$250,000 is requested.

There is currently no funding source(s) identified to fund these proposed recommendations.

Attachments

Attachment I – May 23, 2005, Board Matter

Attachment II – Summary of Complaints

Attachment III - Summary of Recommendations and Compliments